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My Turn

Don Quixote at the airport

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Well, I see our local Don Quixotes are at it again, once more taking up their lances against the dreaded airport expansion.

For decades now, there have been various ideas circulated about expanding either the airport or its mission. The cross-wind runway is merely the most recent of these and has the support of the federal government which is willing to pony up roughly 95 percent of its cost. Of course that's the bogeyman right there: if the feds are pushing it, there has got to be a nefarious reason for it. In the next paragraph feel free to write-in your favorite conspiracy idea about what the government really wants to accomplish, most of which have already been expressed on social media and in a variety of public forums, including this newspaper. I have trouble imagining any of them to be very true.

One common thread which has run through the history of Taos has been its remoteness. It has always been one hard place to get to. Until the highway was finally completed through the Rio Grande Gorge in the mid-1920s making it possible to drive directly to Taos, one either came by horseback through the mountains on the original Camino Real created back in Spanish colonial times or, in somewhat more modern times, by taking the narrow-gauge railroad up through the gorge and then along the mesa, getting off at stops at either Taos Junction, Servilleta or Tres Piedras. Of course, that still left you miles from Taos, so your journey continued from there by stage coach, buckboard, or automobile all of which included rather hair-raising descents into and out of the R'o Grande Gorge on primitive switchback filled dirt roads. Traveling to Taos has always required two things: stamina and an adventurous spirit. So, here we are at the present. I am not a pilot so I don't know the efficacy of what the proposed runway will or will not accomplish. However, I doubt that large commercial jets will start flying into Taos as a result, not because it isn't possible, but because there is no demand. At least twice there have been attempts to have limited commuter flights into Taos on a regular basis at the present airport and both times they have failed because there was not sufficient demand to make them economically viable. I don't think this will change radically in the foreseeable future. As for leading to an influx of wealthy people who will buy up the area and convert it into a playground for the rich, well whether we know it or not, there are already a fair number of wealthy people here. For the most part they live quiet lives and seemingly enjoy Taos for much the same reasons many of the rest of us do. Even the loathsome Donald Rumsfeld, once the initial hoo-ha died down, has pretty much disappeared into anonymity.

Nor do I think the changes at the airport will be a panacea for the many problems that continually bedevil Taos. The economy will not magically blossom with hundreds of good paying jobs that will allow local people to live comfortable lives here. Neither will it spell the death knell for a way of life that has continued to make Taos so attractive to so many outsiders for decades. No, what the airport expansion will mean is that Taos is changing. This apparently is what many people who live here fear more than anything else: CHANGE. Yet, the truth is Taos is constantly changing. Always has been and always will be. Because if it doesn't change then it is dying. The back road areas of America are replete with many small towns that are essentially gone because the times passed them by as they failed to adapt to whatever challenges faced them. Don't kid yourself. It could happen here, too.

On Labor Day 1970 I limped into Cuba, New Mexico with a blown tire and no spare. I pulled into the only open filling station and was relieved to find a helpful owner, who told me he used to live in Taos. He said he had fled Taos to the saner confines of Cuba in 1936 because Taos had been overrun by the outside world and was no longer a fit place to live.

Now I had no idea what Taos might have been like in 1936, but when I arrived in 1969, it did not seem to be a place swallowed up by the modern world. Now, 45 years later I can readily vouch for the fact that Taos has changed in ways I never could have anticipated. But you know what? I've also come to understand that Taos is stronger than all the superficial things that have happened to it and is still a great place to live. I feel certain a new runway at the airport will not destroy that.

Bill Davis is a photographer who has lived in Taos since 1969. He is best known for his collaboration with author John Nichols on the book "If Mountains Die."